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BLACK CONFEDERATES IN THE STATE ARCHIVES

RALEIGH – The North Carolina State Archives hold a number of surprises, not the least of which are records of blacks in North Carolina who served the Confederate Army during the Civil War.

"Many people don't realize that blacks served in the Confederate Army, and that some actually fought," says Earl Ijames, archivist for the Office of Archives and History in the N.C. Department of Cultural Resources.

Ijames, who has researched black Confederate soldiers in North Carolina for more than a decade, said both slaves and free blacks worked or fought for the Confederate cause. But, he said, it's often difficult to determine their exact activities because the social climate of the times did not value or recognize the contributions of blacks.

No one knows how many blacks served the Confederate Army. It is known that some slaves accompanied their masters into battle, but only as personal servants. Other slaves, sent by their masters, mainly worked for the Confederacy to build forts or to transport materials, supplies or corpses. Some free blacks enlisted and actually fought, while other free blacks worked in construction for the Confederate Army.

Official military service records of black soldier's activities have not been found in the state archives. But there are records in the archives that provide some names of black Confederate soldiers, but few details of their service. No accounts exist of battles or valor, hardship or retreat, just the notation "Negro" beside a name. Unofficial records are sketchy, if they survived the Civil War, Reconstruction and Jim Crow eras.

Among the records in North Carolina's archives that document African Americans' service are newspaper enrollment notices that give times for free Negroes to enlist in the Confederate Army, correspondence, Confederate pension applications, and depositions. Some military records note that slaves helped to construct forts or do other work at military facilities. Other documentation can be found in the "North Carolina Troops, 1861-1865," a 15-volume set of reference books that chronicles Confederate servicemen and includes the names of black soldiers.

In some instances, officials even denied the existence of black Confederate soldiers. For instance, Sarah Venable, widow of John W. Venable, applied for a widow's pension. Venable is listed in the "North Carolina Troops, 1861-1865," as a member of Company H, 21st Regiment N.C. Troops. The roster shows that he was

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"Negro, enlisted June 5, 1861. No further records." However, John Sawyer, a white Confederate veteran who served with Venable, submitted a deposition as part of Sarah's application stating that he knew John Venable, and that Venable had "made a good soldier." Yet the claim was disallowed with the notation, "No law for this."

Another pension application came from an attorney in Spring Hope in 1924, on behalf of John Pulley. Pulley had served in Company B under Capt. A. D. Crudup, who was deceased. State Auditor Baxter Durham denied the claim, saying that the Confederacy had no Negro troops.

But some applications from blacks were approved, such as one from Billie Burrell, who said he was sent by his master from Granville County to Fort Fisher, Fort Caswell and Baldhead Island. He may have helped with fort construction and maintenance of the facilities and equipment, Ijames said. Burrell didn't claim to be in the Confederate Army, leading Ijames to speculate that Burrell's application was approved because he didn't claim to be a soldier. In July 1939, Burrell received his pension approval; he was more than 90 years old at the time.

Depositions and correspondence record devoted service by slaves to their masters on the battlefield, usually by providing food and personal care. There are accounts of slaves who might have escaped bondage in the theater of war, but chose to remain and serve, sometimes even after the death of their master.

A particularly poignant example of this was written about the service of the slave George Mills to his master, Walter Bryson. It recounts how George provided bodily comfort and went through several battles with his master. But the greatest service came when Walter was killed in the Battle of Antietam, Md. George recovered the body, then made the long trip home to Hendersonville, N.C., so that his master would not be buried in a ditch with the 24,000 Union and Confederate soldiers who died in battle that day.

Slaves often did whatever needed doing. Ijames shares the story of some slaves who got an unusual assignment at the city of Fayetteville's armory. In a report to Gov. Henry Clark, Fayetteville Mayor Archibal McLean named 27 slaves whose tasks included "police duties in the square, and rear grounds, hauling bricks for the repair of roads, hauling wood for the engine, attending the carpenters, cleaning old flint muskets, packing arms, etc. etc."

"Many people ask why free blacks would join the Confederate Army," Ijames observed. "There could be many reasons. Many free blacks were literate and property owners, so it could have been in their interest to be with the Confederates."

Others factors Ijames sites are religion and loyalty among slaves, saying slaves and free blacks felt a sense of kinship to the land and families that may have made them loyal to the Confederacy. He also pointed out that slavery also had been practiced in the North, and that blacks in the North often found the racism just as real and unwelcoming.

Ijames, who began searching his own roots years ago, learned of the black Confederate soldiers from a co-worker who was entering the North Carolina Confederate pension applications in an electronic database. He began researching the topic then, and has continued. He also makes presentations to civic groups; in 2001, he was awarded the Jefferson Davis Medal by the United Daughters of the Confederacy for his research on black confederates.

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